

Woman of the Year Speech, 2009



By Patricia Garamendi

Good afternoon, it is an honor to be in the company of 81 outstanding women leaders; this is especially so to be honoring my mother in law, Mary Jane Garamendi the matriarch of the

McSorley Garamendi ranch that is now entering its 146th year of continuous operation.

The role of a woman is unique. A woman has the ability to be the backbone, shoulder, heart, head and hands in the home, office, and community. It is the undeniable strength in women, a strength borne of compassion and not force that has brought so many of you here today. Each and every one of you have a heart of service. Your life as a mother, counselor, teacher, business woman is a testament to that fact.

My life of service began as a senior in high school when I attended a charter day speech at UC Berkeley's Memorial Stadium and I met a man who changed my life.

No, not John Garamendi, the man I married, but President John F Kennedy. I had broken my leg skiing so I was close to the stage on the aisle, and had nothing more pressing on my mind than who would be my prom date and what would I wear--- and then JFK brushed by my shoulder as he rushed to the stage to deliver the speech.

I remember him so clearly, the red gold of his hair on that bright sunny California day. His words "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country", hit me right then and there. I knew that I would attend Cal, and then join the Peace Corps. Like so many of my generation I would do something for my country and the world. Those words set my life in the service of others and it has never left me.

John and I joined the Peace Corps upon graduation serving in the far south west of Ethiopia, complete with a mud hut, corrugated iron roof, no running water and the outhouse out back. Teaching, improving water supplies, building medical clinics, and schools was the starting point for my work and now a lifetime of service in the famine camps, and refugee centers around the world, and the homeless shelters and food kitchens of America.



As I think about the work that you do and that I have done, I am reminded of the words of former Peace Corps Director Loret Ruppe for she said our work can be summed up in a simple five letter word---PEACE. We all say it and pray for it whether we talk of war, or community, or family. But this also raises a question. Is Peace simply the absence of war and violence? Or is it the absence of the conditions that bring on war and violence---hunger, disease, poverty, illiteracy, joblessness, despair?

When 50% of the children die in villages before they are five; when women walk miles for water and then search for wood to cook with; when farmers leave their villages where there are no jobs and flock to the cities where there are no jobs; when neighbors ethnically cleanse their neighborhoods,--- then there will be no peace.

When 40% of our children do not finish high school in our great cities and agricultural valleys; when the jobless rate in these places is over 50% for young men; when asthma is common in one quarter of our children in these communities; when 50% of our children live below the poverty level and the food lines grow and tent cities expand; and when we threaten future generations with a radically changed environment,--- then there will be no peace.

Yet, no matter the difficulties, and we have many, California is still a state full of hope and possibilities, the entire world looks to us. We have a solid foundation upon which to answer the challenges of our time and in this room are 81 incredible women who in their lives have answered the call to service. In your work and in your lives you have sought and found answers to the problems in your community, in our state and in our planetary village. You did not seek accolades, for that is not your reason for a life of service, but today each and everyone of you is receiving the grateful acknowledgement of the California State Assembly. You deserve it.